

THE FIRST FRAGMENTED CHURCH OF ENTROPY

Order from chaos.

BY STEVEN FISCHER

There's a sign hanging up on the side of the fence, although I'm not sure it really merits the word 'sign'. It looks more like a pasted preschool collage — letters snatched from holo displays and antique marquees mashed together like Mark's Thursday-night casserole.

I check the screen on my wrist, pulling up the infofeed and matching it to the words on the sign.

First Fragmented Church of Entropy

Speaking of Mark, where the heck is he? He's the one who dragged me here, after all.

I take another look at the building — crumbling brickwork and shattered windows — and step up to where the door should be. It's gone, of course, rusted off the hinges and lying in the weeds to the side of the walkway.

This is already worse than I'd expected.

I step inside and almost lose my footing. The floor's a jumble of tiles, polyfibre and something green and alive. Like someone flew a trash cruiser around town and then dumped whatever they found here.

The church is packed. It's just one big room littered with places to sit. I'd call them seats, but you know the drill by now. In one corner, a man and his son are smashing vases with a baseball bat. Across the room, someone in a devil costume stuffs little balls into one half of a clear container while his friend operates a door to the other half.

I catch sight of Mark lounging on half a couch beside a tree stump and hurry over to him, sidestepping a swimming pool that *obviously* belongs here. "Hi there!" I say, glad to see something familiar in a place so out of whack.

He kisses me and grins. "What do you think?"

"Well, it's certainly... something." I glance at the tangle of display screens, holo projectors and old neon bar signs hanging from the ceiling. "Although I imagine they're breaking a few building codes."

Mark smiles and shrugs. "Everything breaks, eventually."

He's been saying that a lot, lately. And although his suddenly carefree attitude has been a pleasant change, my PhD screams whenever I hear it. I open my mouth to explain that there's more to entropy than disorganized decorating schemes and breaking



things, but he's staring at the stage with a big, giddy grin.

"It's starting," he whispers.

The lights dim — well, the ones that work do — and the room explodes with noise. I would say music, if it wasn't so damn painful to hear.

I look around and realize the 'band' is scattered throughout the auditorium. There's a guy up on stage, sure enough, hammering away on an oversized electric xylophone, but there's also a lady lounging right behind us, revving the dismembered engine of a hoverbike in what she must know isn't a rhythm. I swear I hear a goose and half the rest of a farm somewhere, but I can't quite place them.

And then it stops.

A bespectacled old man gets up from his chair and shuffles on to the stage. Not exactly what I'd expected from a cult leader. I'm sorry, not a cult — Mark's not a fan of that word — 'a progressive, enlightened community'.

"Good morning," he says. And in the first normal event since I've arrived, everybody says it back. He smiles, takes the digital prompter in his hands, and throws it into the air.

"Everything breaks!" he proclaims. The prompter shatters on the floor, and everybody claps.

Aaaaaand, we're back to crazy.

He looks out at the crowd for a moment,

his frazzled, unkempt hair threatening to blind him. "I hear we have a visitor in our congregation today."

I do my best to sink into the seat, but he points straight at me. "Welcome!" he says. "Why don't you come up front?"

Mark's practically giggling with excitement. He grabs my arm and tries to pull me to my feet. "Come on, Jan," he whispers. "It'll be fun."

I give him my best glare and work my way up to the stage. The pastor (priest? head thermodynamicist?) turns to me expectantly. "So, what brought you here today?"

I point at Mark. "He did." If he's making me be here, he better at least take the blame.

The man shakes his head. "No, no, no. What *really* brought you here?"

My mouth shuts. Because I'm worried my boyfriend signed on with some desperate freaks doesn't seem like a viable answer. "I suppose I have a few questions."

The room bursts into applause. For this?

"Well," old white-hair replies, "ask away."

I know what Mark would say. That I'm stressed out and harassed and constantly glued to a schedule and a screen. That his sudden ability to take life in his stride since he started coming here has me intrigued. And, it's true, but...

Is that — is that a bonfire by the back door?

Enough is enough. "Yeah. I was wondering how a church that claims to worship disorder justifies getting a group together each week, in one building for a set purpose, and teaching them about a topic discovered through centuries of highly regimented thought and experimentation. You can see the irony, right?"

I wait for him to say something, but he just stares. Then, he walks off the stage and right out the front door. One by one, the rest of the congregation leaves too, until it's just me and Mark in the auditorium.

I walk down the steps and take his hand as we head towards the door. "I'm really sorry about that," I mutter. "I know I promised to be civil."

Outside, the old man is tearing the sign down letter by letter.

Mark shrugs and grins back at me. "Everything breaks, eventually." ■

Steven Fischer is a student living in southern Wisconsin. In his free time, he enjoys dabbling in science fiction and exploring the great northwoods with his wife.

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